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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

20 March 1985

Soviets Take Tougher Line on Berlin Air Corridors

Summary

Since early February, the Soviets have hardened their position on the Berlin air corridors. Although they still are observing the modest geographic limitations that they established in December on their restrictions of corridor airspace, they have refused to continue the detailed negotiations over Allied landing requirements that they began at that time. The chief Soviet controller maintains that the Soviet Air Force is adamant on the issue and that any further compromises could require decisions at the highest political and military levels and take months to achieve. [redacted]

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This memorandum examines the factors that may be underlying the hardening of the Soviet position:

- The downturn may be in part a negotiating tactic designed to further probe the Allied position.
- The Soviet military has a strong interest in maximizing its freedom of operation in the air corridors and probably is arguing for maintaining a tough line.

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This paper was prepared by [redacted] of the Office of Soviet Analysis. Comments and questions may be directed to the author [redacted] or to the Chief, Policy Analysis Division, [redacted]

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- [REDACTED]
- Although Soviet political authorities do not appear to want this issue to become a major irritant in East-West relations, they may be using the issue to signal dissatisfaction with Western policies on other matters.
 - Alternatively, the Soviet leadership, perhaps preoccupied with Kremlin succession politics, may not have given the issue sufficient attention to overrule the military's interest in preventing further compromises. [REDACTED]

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The evidence available does not clearly point to one factor over the others, and except for the latter two, they are not mutually exclusive and could be working in combination. In any event, we conclude that the Soviets probably will not move to break the deadlock on the issue unless faced with stronger Allied pressure. They do not appear willing to take any significant steps toward improved quadripartite management of the air corridors, and statements by the chief Soviet air controller continue to suggest that the response of his political authorities is dependent on the level of Allied pressure. [REDACTED]

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The Berlin Air Regime



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In recent years, the Soviets routinely have reserved low-altitude airspace in the Berlin air corridors to accommodate major increases in the frequency and extent of their military training and exercises in East Germany. In February 1984, the Soviets stated that henceforth their airspace reservations would cover the entire length of the corridors from the West German border to the edge of the Berlin Control Zone (BCZ). Allied aircraft have been forced to make steep descents and sometimes to spiral down into the city--complicating air traffic control and creating an air safety hazard--to avoid passing through the edge of this reserved airspace when making landing approaches to Berlin.

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After the Allies protested against this Soviet practice throughout 1984 both in the Berlin Air Safety Center (BASC) and through diplomatic channels (including a demarche by Secretary of State Shultz to Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin in late October) the Soviets in early December took steps that seemed designed to defuse the issue. They began relaxing their corridor restrictions to provide Allied aircraft with less steep landing approaches, permitting them to begin to descend to lower altitudes at distances ranging from 6.2 to 8.7 miles outside the BCZ. They also began discussing Allied landing requirements and said that further compromises could be reached. Allied controllers noted, for instance, that the chief Soviet controller, Colonel Prokof'yev, accepted in principle the Allied contention that higher altitude reservations necessitate more distance through which Allied aircraft can descend (lower altitude reservations cover airspace up to 3500 feet, higher altitude reservations generally go up to 4500 feet).

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We believe their responses were timed to influence Allied discussions of Berlin issues at the December NATO ministerial meeting. They may also have reflected increasing Soviet interest in smoothing over secondary disputes with the United States in anticipation of the meeting between Secretary Shultz and Foreign Minister Gromyko in early January. By the end of January, US authorities in Berlin thought that there had been some movement in addition to the somewhat eased landing approach profile:

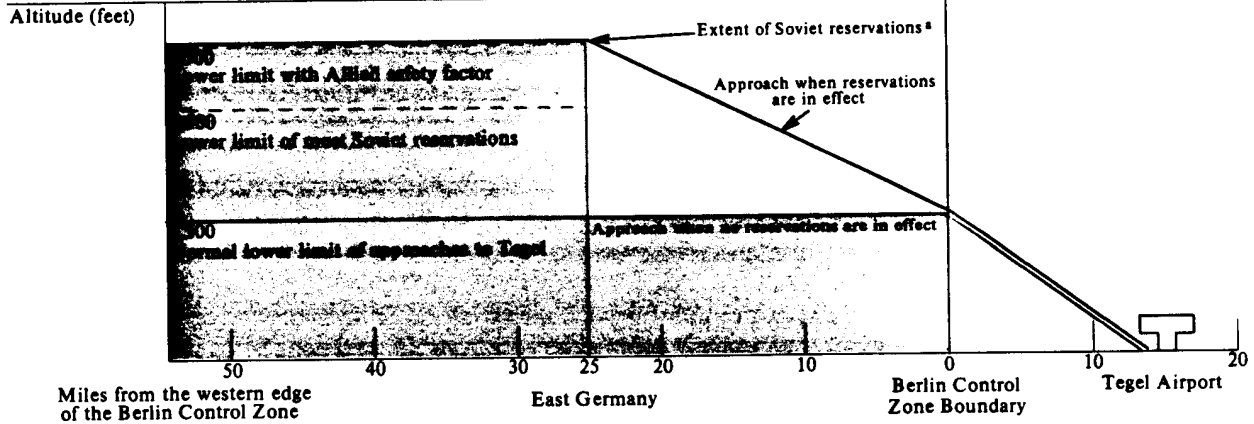
- Prokof'yev had been willing to participate in detailed discussions with the Allied and Soviet controllers. He periodically reported that his authorities were considering the guidelines proposed by the Allied controllers. As recently as 30 January he was saying that while those authorities had not yet responded to Allied presentations, the outlook for continued progress was good.
- At a 17 January luncheon, the deputy chief of the Soviet Embassy in East Berlin, Valeriy Popov, told US Minister Ledsky that a satisfactory working arrangement for cooperatively managing the air regime was needed. He said he hoped the matter could be resolved in the BASC in the

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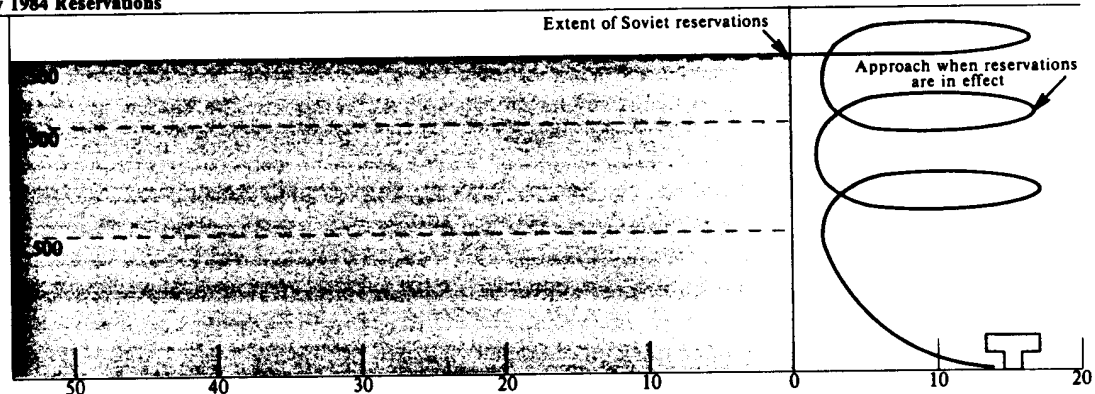
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Impact of Soviet Reservation Changes on Approaches to Tegel Airport

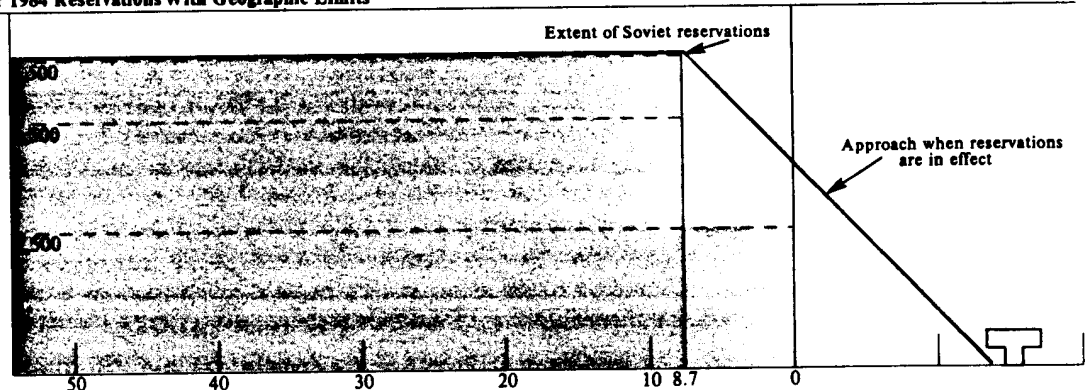
Pre-20 February 1984 Reservations



Post-20 February 1984 Reservations



Post-8 December 1984 Reservations With Geographic Limits



* The eastern lateral limits to reservations most frequently used before 20 February 1984 were lines drawn perpendicular to the corridors through three East German towns 21 to 31 miles from the edge of the Berlin Control Zone.

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weeks ahead, adding that Prokof'yev had been instructed to be cooperative, to listen to the Allies, and to try to work out something that met the needs of both sides.

- In a meeting with the new British ambassador to West Germany on 28 January, Soviet Ambassador to East Germany Kochemasov reiterated longstanding Soviet arguments that NATO INF deployments had caused the air corridor problem by forcing increased Soviet military air activity, but he said the problem was now being resolved in the BASC.

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Despite the modest change in the Soviet position on reservations, however, and the indications in December and January of Soviet willingness to compromise, there has been only minimal progress in concrete terms:

- The 8.7 miles beyond the BCZ currently permitted Allied aircraft are insufficient for safe air traffic control but the Soviets have refused to provide any more distance, even when high-altitude reservations are made. (Although the Allies have acknowledged that a single proper landing at one airfield can be calculated using a reservation-free area 8.7 miles long, they have maintained that a 20-mile reservation-free area is required because of the large number of flights landing at the three different airfields in the city under varying weather conditions.)
- The Soviets continue to insist that they have a unilateral right to make airspace reservations with short notice, claiming that the needs of the Soviet Air Force come first and effectively ignoring the Allied position on the need for quadripartite managements of the air corridors.
- At the end of December, the Soviets notified the Allies of several reservations for the entire length of the corridors. When the Allies protested, Prokof'yev apologized for the inconvenience but recalled a warning he had made earlier in the month that full-length reservations would occasionally be required.

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Soviets Harden Their Position

Although they have continued since early December to put geographic limits of up to 8.7 miles on most of their reservations, at the 6 February BASC meeting the Soviets reverted to a more assertive, uncompromising approach and have refused to negotiate further on Allied landing requirements. Prokof'yev's attitude at that meeting was considerably less positive than it had been in preceding weeks, and he said that a response from his authorities on extending geographic limits could take months. His comment that "frank and detailed higher-level discussions" might be necessary to get the limits extended seemed calculated to invite the Allies to raise the issue at a higher level. At

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the end of the meeting, he gave the Allies advance notice that higher altitude reservations would be made in the next few days to facilitate a major military exercise. [redacted]

The next day, the Soviets notified the Allies that a higher-altitude reservation would be in effect for an exercise the following day. Allied controllers were told at the same time that a reservation-free area 18.6 miles outside the BCZ would be provided. Although not the full 20 miles sought by the Allies, Western controllers initially believed that the greater distance seemed to confirm Prokof'yev's acceptance--stated in earlier meetings--of the Western position that higher altitude reservations require additional space for the safe descent of Allied aircraft. Less than two hours later, however, the Soviets revoked the longer distance and returned to their earlier position of offering only 8.7 miles of reservation-free space despite the higher altitude of the reservation. Prokof'yev claimed that he had been able to get generous limits in the original plan for the next day's exercise but that changes in the exercise plan had required him to alter the reservation. He argued that the abrupt change had occurred because he had tried to accommodate Allied requests for early notice. [redacted]

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In the last few weeks, the atmosphere in the BASC has continued to deteriorate. The Soviets appear to have adopted the same stalling tactics on new geographic limits that they used when they were making full-length corridor reservations last year, claiming that further developments will require high-level decisions and could take months. Prokof'yev is no longer offering optimism and has characterized the current negotiations in the BASC as deadlocked. [redacted]

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Reasons for Tougher Stance

We do not know from direct evidence why the Soviets switched back to a more uncooperative approach in February, but believe that there are several factors that could--singly or in combination--be underlying the precipitate change. [redacted]

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1. Negotiating Tactics. The Soviets may have interpreted Allied statements in recent months as a softening in the Western position and may have adopted a tougher line in order to see if the Allies would make further changes in their position:

- Before 8 December, when the Soviets modified their reservations, the Allies responded to Soviet notifications of reservations by saying: "I have been instructed by my authorities to reject this notification. You are requested to ask your authorities to reverse their decision. We expect a rapid response from you in this matter."
- Beginning on 8 December, the Allies changed the wording of their response: "We have noted the statement by the

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[redacted]

Soviet element concerning use of the north, center, and south corridors between [redacted] on [redacted]. While reserving the response which our authorities might make to this statement, we must remind you that the Allied right to fly in the corridors and the Berlin Control Zone is unrestricted." [redacted]

The chief US air controller also has suggested at least three times since early December that the Allies would accept reservation guidelines permitting less than their current demand for 20 miles outside the BCZ:

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- On 24 January, he said that although the distance offered by the Soviets was not enough, the Allies had not insisted that they get 20 miles.
- On 30 January, he said it was his personal view that 16-17 miles outside the zone should be adequate--barring unforeseen circumstances.
- On 13 February, he suggested a formula providing for approximately 15 miles for lower altitude reservations, and 20 miles for higher altitude reservations. [redacted]

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We believe that the Soviets may have interpreted these statements as an easing of the Allied position and decided to hold off making compromise offers of their own until they felt the West had revealed its most conciliatory offer. In addition, there is a good chance, in our opinion, that the Soviets are aware that there are differences between the Allies on the issue (the French tend to take the most aggressive stance, the British the least) and may be trying to exploit them. [redacted]

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We do not think, however, that negotiating tactics entirely account for the overall deterioration in the atmosphere in the BASC. If the Soviets were simply intent on playing a waiting game to see how much further the Allies might bend, their record suggests they probably would have continued at least to portray themselves as trying to negotiate in good faith. Indeed, from Moscow's viewpoint, between 8 December and 6 February the Soviets apparently had been able to defuse Western concerns over their intransigence by negotiating in the BASC, while giving up nothing concrete beyond the limited number of miles provided in December. [redacted]

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2. Military Pressure. The Soviet military has substantially increased the frequency and extent of its exercises in East Germany and thus has an interest in maximizing its freedom of operation in the air corridors. It probably also wants to limit the maneuverability of US intelligence flights as much as possible and almost certainly for some time has been pushing for more control over corridor airspace. A hint of this was contained in deputy mission chief Popov's statement that the Soviets had reacted to problems in the corridors too quickly and

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[redacted]

had not developed the best possible solution in February 1984 because a limited margin for maneuver had been dictated by the Soviet military. Military authorities probably view any backing away from the full-length corridor restrictions claimed between 20 February and 8 December last year as a deterioration in their position and may well have disagreed with the Soviet position taken in the BASC in early December. [redacted]

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The extent to which the Soviets actually utilize their reserved airspace varies widely, and they only occasionally use the disputed miles near Berlin. This suggests that in practical terms the military would give up little if it permitted some increases in geographic limits at certain times. Yet the Soviets have shown no flexibility whatsoever on the limits--to the point of clumsily reversing themselves within three hours on 7 February. It may be that this intransigence results from military pressure that authorities in Moscow have not overruled. The chief Soviet controller--who takes his day-to-day orders from the military but also reports to the Soviet embassy--has repeatedly stated that the Soviet Air Force would make no more concessions, and that any further progress would require decisions at the highest political and military levels. [redacted]

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3. East-West Signal. The Soviets may wish to signal that the West can expect to pay a price for Soviet unhappiness with Western policies elsewhere, or they may wish to show displeasure with US statements on arms control compliance and on the negotiability of the Strategic Defense Initiative at the Geneva arms talks. They may see the air corridor issue as an appropriate one for this purpose because it touches a sensitive spot but is amenable to manipulation without arousing West European public opinion since it is not high on the public agenda. While the February downturn may not have come to the attention of the entire topmost leadership collective, Foreign Minister Gromyko probably is apprised at least periodically of the situation in and around Berlin and may well have authorized the change. [redacted]

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On the other hand, quadripartite management of the air corridors involves Soviet relations with the British and French as well as with the United States. Moscow is currently mounting a concerted propaganda and diplomatic effort to court West European opinion. As part of this effort, the Soviets have recently adopted a strategy in other multilateral forums, such as MBFR and CDE, similar to the approach they took in early December on the corridor issue: appearing willing to negotiate, offering limited progress, but giving up little in concrete terms. The recent deterioration in the atmosphere in the BASC, which had only begun to improve some three months ago, would seem inconsistent with this strategy, but this relatively low-level forum may be viewed as a suitable exception since it attracts little publicity in West Europe. [redacted]

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4. Distracted Political Leadership. Alternatively, the February downturn may have resulted not from a leadership decision, but from the opposite--leadership inattention. The posture adopted in December was, in our judgment, a purposeful action, probably taken at a high level because of high-level Allied demarches and in anticipation of the January Shultz-Gromyko meeting. Once this policy was adopted, however, the top leadership may have turned over implementation to Gromyko. Gromyko may have decided on his own to turn to a tougher line, or he and his colleagues, preoccupied with internal succession politics as Chernenko's health worsened, may have left the detailed and technical issue to political and military authorities at lower levels. This factor may explain Prokof'yev's seeming invitations to the Allies to raise the issue at a higher level. [REDACTED]

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Implications

The situation in the air corridors represents the most serious erosion of Allied rights in and around Berlin in recent years. Even if the negotiations in December and January had succeeded in establishing a guideline on the appropriate distance for geographic limits, it would have been only a first step toward restoring Allied rights. Full quadripartite management would also require basic changes in the frequency, duration, and unilateral assertion of corridor reservations from the Soviet side. [REDACTED]

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Whatever mix of factors is responsible for Soviet behavior in February, there are no current indications that the deadlock in the BASC will be alleviated by unilateral Soviet actions. It thus appears that further Allied actions will be required to move the Soviets from their intransigent position. A range of possible Allied moves, from further demarches to demonstration flights through Soviet-reserved airspace, is available. Soviet responses to such actions will in part depend on which of the factors outlined in this memorandum are more important. [REDACTED]

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High-level Demarches. If the uncompromising Soviet approach reflects inattention by distracted political leaders, vigorous Allied demarches--particularly at higher levels--may prompt the Soviets to return to the more serious, detailed kind of negotiations that took place in the BASC in December and January. [REDACTED]

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If, on the other hand, their present posture is the result of more purposeful decisions to test Allied resolve or to send a

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[redacted]

political signal, they may respond with tough bargaining in an effort to explore Allied concerns and to further highlight Western vulnerability in and around Berlin. [redacted]

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In any event, we believe it likely that the immediate Soviet reply to Allied demarches would be to simply restate the needs of the Soviet military and claim--as the Soviets have in the past in response to high-level protests--that the issue can be solved in the BASC as a purely technical matter. Indications of any change in the Soviet position probably would have to await subsequent BASC meetings. [redacted]

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Demonstration Flights. These would be viewed by the Soviet military as directly challenging its interests in the area, and could spur military as well as diplomatic Soviet actions. Although the risk of a shoot-down would probably be less for a flight which would only cut through the disputed miles outside the BCZ (rather than a flight through the entire length of a reservation over extensive military facilities), the Soviets could still respond by increasing risks to Allied flight safety. For example, they could interfere with demonstration flights by hovering helicopters in the disputed area. They could also fly an increased number of fighters throughout the corridors, even when reservations are not in effect, since technically they have the right to use the corridors whether or not they make a reservation. [redacted]

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Judging from the minor improvements in December--in response to high-level indications of Allied concern and interest--it would appear that the Soviets do not want this matter to become a major irritant in East-West relations. They may nonetheless believe that they need compromise no further on the issue; the Soviet military in particular appears reluctant to endorse further movement. Substantial compromises toward restoring Allied rights, therefore, are in our view likely only in the face of stronger Allied actions. Indeed, Colonel Prokof'ev said on 20 February that all Allied demands were passed to the Soviet Embassy and discussed at that level; the response, he said, depended on the "intensity of the demand." He did not elaborate, but Allied controllers interpreted him to be saying that the response of his political authorities was dependent on the level of Allied pressure. [redacted]

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